Education Reform and the Limits of Policy: Lessons from Michigan

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KALAMAZOO, Mich.—During the last 20 years, the United States has experienced more attempts at education reform than at any other time in its history. Efforts to reform financing, the assessment of student performance, accountability and equity, and school choice have all been implemented—with varying levels of success.

In a new book from the Upjohn Institute Press, Education Reform and the Limits of Policy: Lessons from Michigan, Michael F. Addonizio and C. Philip Kearney use Michigan as a laboratory to examine a set of commonly implemented reforms as they attempt to answer three key questions: 1) What is the nature of these reforms? 2) What do they hope to accomplish? and 3) How successful have they been? The answers they provide will be of interest to anyone concerned with education reform.

The authors begin by examining what is perennially one of the most contentious issues facing education—money and schools. Does more money make schools better? They review existing evidence on the link between resources and schools and then examine financing reform resulting from the passage in 1994 of Michigan’s Proposal A, which greatly altered the way the state’s schools are financed. Addonizio and Kearney discuss the impact it has had on equity for both students and taxpayers as well as the issue of funding adequacy.

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Next, they examine accountability systems for Michigan’s schools and whether they meet the federal directives of No Child Left Behind. Related to the issue of accountability are the key assessment programs, i.e., the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP), and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), that are used to measure academic achievement and how Michigan’s students’ performance ranks with students in other states.

Addonizio and Kearney also address the growing trend of school choice, both the options for parents to select charter schools for their children to attend or to send them out-of-district via a “school of choice” program. Charters, sometimes referred to as public school academies, are a fast-growing movement that, as the authors point out, present “somewhat mixed hopes for the future.” They also identify the benefits and potential pitfalls of the school of choice program.

Finally, possibly no other school district in the country has suffered the decline that the Detroit Public Schools has. The authors discuss the many reasons for the district’s problems, the efforts—including state oversight—to right the ship, and the direction in which they see the district headed as it adapts to the splintering of the city’s neighborhoods and loss of population to the suburbs.

The book concludes with a discussion of what has been gleaned from the successes and failures of various reform efforts, and based on the authors’ observations and analyses, thoughts and ideas for the future of education reform.

The Authors

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Bullet points

- The authors observe an overall upward and centralizing movement of authority and decision-making in K-12 education.

- Pertaining to equity for taxpayers, Michigan’s Proposal A produced a mixed bag of results. Those remaining in their homes for long periods are benefiting by having lower taxable values on their homes while more mobile homeowners, who are less permanent in their residences, pay comparatively higher property taxes. Due to the regressive nature of the sales tax, increasing it from 4 to 6 percent hurt lower-income residents.

- Michigan’s current tax structure is not delivering the revenues needed to adequately support essential public services, including but not limited to education.

- Judging by test scores, Michigan’s public education system is failing many of its students. Yet little has been done to determine the level of resources required in order to give all students the opportunity to achieve academically.

- The authors observe mixed results on the success of charter schools.

- Michigan’s Schools of Choice program is a boon for nonresident students and receiving districts, but a “lose-lose” situation for sending districts.